



Immigrant children may keep Rlte Care

The governor yesterday suggested he might abandon his proposal to end state-paid health insurance for 3,000 noncitizen children.

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At a breakfast yesterday to draw attention to the ways Rhode Island has supported and failed its children, the governor softened his rhetoric regarding undocumented immigrant children. In fact, he suggested he might abandon his proposal to end state-paid health insurance for such children. Governor Carcieri said he still feels that providing health insurance to those children is "not a good policy." However, he said, "I am prepared to work with the General Assembly to see if we can at least grandfather the cohort we have, but stop the program going forward."

Carcieri's announcement -- which took many audience members by surprise -- came at a breakfast of Rhode Island Kids Count at the Crowne Plaza hotel in Warwick. He said it hinged on an unexpected revenue source -- \$9 million that the state expects in extra reimbursement from Washington.

Carcieri was cryptic in his remarks, saying only, "I anticipate we're going to be pleasantly surprised with some funds coming from the federal government." However, his staff said later in the day that the Republican governor got a verbal commitment from Michael O. Leavitt, the Secretary of Health and Human Services, that Rhode Island would be reimbursed at 68 percent -- rather than the 52 percent Carcieri's budget proposal assumed -- for some money the state spends on health care for children through the State Children's Health Insurance Program, or S-CHIP.

The S-CHIP program was designed to allow states to expand health insurance to children whose families earn too much to qualify for Medicaid yet not enough to afford private insurance. The funds must be used for qualified services, as defined by federal law. However, the extra reimbursement would free state general revenues for other uses. The federal government has not yet announced that it will provide the extra money to Rhode Island, nor does the state have anything in writing. However, Leavitt has "a great deal of discretion in deciding how to redistribute this money,"

Jeff Neal, Carcieri's spokesman, said. "It was important for the governor and our congressional delegation to be in touch with [Leavitt] to make Rhode Island's case for receiving additional funding." Among those surprised by Carcieri's announcement was Rep. Steven M. Costantino, D-Providence, the House Finance Committee chairman. "I think it's good news if it's real," said Costantino, who did not attend the breakfast. "It

would be a terrible disappointment . . . if it's not." Carcieri's suggestion of cutting off RIte Care for an estimated 3,000 noncitizen children, to save \$4 million next fiscal year, has been immensely unpopular with advocates for children and the poor.

However, those advocates said yesterday that the new proposal -- letting those children keep RIte Care but preventing new enrollment of noncitizen children -- still falls short. "It's good that he's feeling some pressure to move off of his original position," said Marti Rosenberg, director of Ocean State Action, "but his new proposal will change nothing about the fact that children will still be here, ill, in a pay-now or pay-more-later situation."

Sen. Stephen D. Alves, D-West Warwick, chairman of the Senate Finance Committee, agreed. By taking away health care for children whom, under federal law, Rhode Island's public schools still must educate, "all we're going to do is push them off on the system," Alves said. Their health care, he said, "would all go under uncompensated care," care that hospitals provide free of charge to patients unable to pay.

"In a country such as ours, with everything that we do have, I don't think any child should go without health care," Alves said. "I think most people in this state feel the same way." If Alves wholeheartedly supports restoring RIte Care for the noncitizen children, Costantino is less certain, considering the size of the deficit the state must fill -- an estimated \$300 million over two years. "Obviously, this has been an issue we've restored in the past, so it's been an important issue to us," Costantino said yesterday. But, he said, "We need to prioritize on these cuts. These cuts are very deep. It's not just one constituency that's affected this year."

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